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**Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”**  
**The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945**

**Series 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Political Ascension**

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**Washington - Navy League Convention**

April 13, 1946

[Washington, D.C.]

FDR Speech File

*For the Press. To be released  
Friday morning, April 14, 1916.*

Address of Assistant Secretary of the  
Navy Roosevelt, Navy League Convention, New Will-  
lard Hotel, April 13, 1916.

To naval officers and people who have followed the needs of naval preparedness for the past decade or two instead of the past year or two the present phenomenon of public interest is gratefully surprising, and while everything should be done, of course, to encourage this public interest and public information, certain features of the awakening are just a trifle amusing. Taking as an example the question of personnel, that is to say, the question of manning our ships with officers and men, a great many people believe that in the past six months or a year they have made startling discoveries of revolutionary interest. A year or so ago I made a <sup>simple</sup> statement of fact which was known to anybody who could figure with a pencil, that in order to man all of the ships in the Navy with full complements 18,000 more men would be necessary. The headlines of the newspapers carried the news abroad on the front page as a new discovery. ~~Within a few weeks~~ <sup>ago,</sup> in answer to a question before the Naval Committee of Congress, I stated the <sup>simple</sup> fact, known to any person familiar with the duties of the Navy, that in case of war with a first-class naval power, we should undoubtedly need over 200,000 men in the Naval Service.

The fact is, of course, that the people of the country are for the first time beginning to be interested in real facts instead of in oratorical generalities. Of course, some individuals are taking personal advantage of the change of mind of the public to pose as the fathers of preparedness, where their own record, when they themselves were in a position to make the record, proves quite conclusively that they took no steps to lead, but merely followed the accepted popular frame of mind of their own time.

In this matter of personnel, for instance, down to this great awakening of the present day every Secretary of the Navy, every

officer of the Navy, knew full well that only a certain number of ships in the Navy could be fully commissioned. For instance, when the fleet went around the world it was necessary in order to commission all of the sixteen battleships and the few auxiliaries which <sup>went</sup> them to strip many other vessels of their officers and men, to borrow here, there and the other place, from shore stations and other shore assignments, with the result that while the main fleet was in full commission the naval establishment as a whole was seriously weakened. Again, in 1912, when President Taft reviewed the so-called "great mobilization" in New York Harbor, a surprisingly large number of the ships there present were in bad physical condition; some had actually to be towed to their anchorages; others were kept afloat by working the pumps day and night. A great number of them were short of officers and men and it was only by the use of the Naval Militia and by the authorization, under doubtful legality, of short-term enlistments that the quota was as large as it was. Further, the public believed that all was well with the Navy, whereas, any person who was interested enough to ascertain the facts knew the dangerous weaknesses which existed.

All this, is, of course, history. It ought not to concern us at the present time; it only does concern us because of the fact that a few selfish individuals are trying to gain personal or political profit by a misstatement of historical facts. It is, therefore, unnecessary for me to go any further into the deficiencies of the past, more than to add that when I became connected with the service in an official way three years ago, while things seemed to be running beautifully on the surface, the accumulated shortness in materials and men had become an alarming danger. Nor will I go into the really great additions in materials and munitions during the past three years, nor into the increase of four or five thousand men in the personnel during this period. What you and I are concerned about today is the present situation and I will give facts with special reference to

personnel as clearly and briefly as possible.

No navy has in time of peace been maintained on a complete war footing; that is to say, a certain number of older ships have been kept in reserve with only partial crews, the <sup>intention</sup> ~~object~~ being to fill out these crews with reserves in case of war. The General Board of the Navy has recommended 15,000 additional men this year and this recommendation has also been made by the Secretary to Congress. This is probably the maximum number of men which we could enlist in one year in addition to the usual quota, and this number will take care of the increase of the fleet during the coming year and of the deficiencies of the past. It will not and does not pretend to put every ship in full commission. It goes without saying, of course, that the highest efficiency would be obtained by putting all ships in full commission and keeping none in reserve. This would require at least another 10,000 men, but it is fair to say that no nation has in time of peace conducted her naval establishment in this way, trusting to the existence or creation of a reserve force at least sufficient to fill out the crews. I think that if Congress authorizes the enlistment of 15,000 additional men this year, a thoroughly proper step will have been taken, though it must be with the distinct understanding that more men will be necessary next year to take care of the additional construction. Certain people have been spreading the report that the reason the Navy is now under-manned is that we cannot get men to enlist. This is, of course, absolutely false. Not only are we accepting only one man out of six who apply, <sup>DA</sup> but for the first time almost in our history, the legal limit has been maintained day and night during the past two years. In addition to this, the so-called "unpopularity" of the Navy, <sup>is disproved</sup> ~~shown~~ by the fact that 85% of the men whose terms of enlistment expire are, at the present time, re-enlisting in the service. This is a far higher average than at any prior time.

Coming now to the question of officers, it is also true that we are short ~~that~~ that we need many more, but that we cannot merely, by passing an act of Congress, add officers to the service. The best thing possible has been done and that has been to add to the number at the Naval Academy, making it half again as large. The benefit of this <sup>increase</sup>, of course, will not be felt for a number of years, and during the next ten years at least, the problem of the lack of officers will be a serious one.

In view then of these facts, in view of what we have learned from Europe in regard to the actualities of modern warfare, it becomes clear that immediate steps must be taken to create a reserve of officers and men which in time of war would fit, without delay or loss of motion, into their proper places. I have said that we should need in the naval service under war conditions over 200,000 men. This is based on our own war plans and on the increases made in Europe. If we take ~~the peace numbers of~~ of the regular forces of our Navy in time of peace at 75,000, this means an addition of at least 125,000 men. The Naval Militia of 8,000 will, of course, be of the greatest assistance, especially in their present state of greatly improved efficiency, but they will be but a drop in the bucket. Where, then, is the reserve to come from? It goes without saying that after war breaks out it is too late to begin to train a reserve force. The work and the training must be done in time of peace.

Three classes of individuals must necessarily make up this reserve:

First, the former retired officers and enlisted ~~men~~ of the regular Navy and Naval Militia. Probably we cannot ultimately count on more than about 15,000 of these.

Secondly, men now engaged professionally in sea-faring pursuits, that is to say, the officers and men of the merchant marine, over-seas,

coastal, Great Lakes, fishermen, etc. We cannot, of course, stop all of our commercial activities by taking all of these into the naval service, and it is probably a fair estimate that not more than 30,000 or 40,000 would be taken into the naval service. This leaves us still with a deficiency of at least 75,000.

Thirdly, (and this would, of course, be by far the largest class) civilians not connected with the merchant marine or the regular naval service. The problem of creating a proper reserve of these men is a great one, far less great, of course, than in the case of the Army, ~~and~~ <sup>but</sup> it is not a problem which can be solved in a day or a year. We ~~are~~ taking the first step, however, this Summer by adopting a leaf from the notebook of the Army. We are going to hold on the Atlantic Coast a great "Naval Plattsburg."

This naval training cruise for civilians will be held ~~at~~ probably on eight battleships of the reserve fleet, each ship manned by her reserve crew of about 300 and adding thereto 500 civilians. These ships will start from various ports along the coast from Boston ~~on~~ to the north to Charleston on the south. They will rendezvous and cruise in company for three weeks, taking part, we hope, in the war game on the 20th of August, thence returning to their home ports. Here the fourth and final week of the cruise will be given up to exercises in matters of local defense in cooperation with the Coast Artillery and with the owners of suitable motor boats of the locality. This first year we are endeavoring to get men of really valuable qualifications to take this cruise; that is to say, civilians who have ~~had~~ a love for and knowledge of the water or men of mechanical or electrical ability. As ~~in the case of~~ <sup>at</sup> Plattsburg, they will be given the routine work of drill and general training during a part of the day, but will be allowed to specialize during the afternoons in the subject for which they are most fitted; as for instance, gunnery work, signalling, navigation, boat work, engine, electrical or radio work.

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At the end of this cruise each man will undoubtedly be of some value, however slight, in time of war and if he so desires will be tentatively assigned to a station where he would immediately report on telegraphic instructions.

To be sure, this will add only about 4,000 men to the naval reserve, but if the experiment works it will be possible during following years to extend the opportunities for training not only on this coast but also to the Great Lakes and to the Pacific.

What I want especially to emphasize is that every naval officer has during the past known what war would mean. The need for preparedness has existed in the past just as it does today. At last I believe the people of the country are going to accept the judgment of the men who know, of the men who are paid by the people to know. The war in Europe has brought home to us facts which have always been facts, but which we have been unwilling to learn until now. The Navy is doing everything possible to increase its efficiency. I think that it is the consensus of opinion among the great majority of the officers of the service that the time for knowing has gone by, and that the time for boasting has come. They want, and the Administration, irrespective of party questions, wants the cooperation of everybody in the work of building. Heaven ~~only~~<sup>if</sup> knows there is enough constructive work to be done at the present time ~~for~~ the people of the country, through their representatives in Congress, will only give us a chance to do that work. ~~Every argument about the mistakes of the past slows up the construction.~~ \* I sincerely hope that the members of the Navy League all over the United States will devote themselves wholeheartedly to constructive and not to destructive labors.

*Macdonald*





Every minute of time taken up in perfectly futile and useless argument about mistakes in the past slows up construction that much. Worse than that it blinds and befoggs the public as to the real situation and the imperative necessity for prompt action. How would you expect the public to be convinced that a dangerous fire was in progress, requiring every citizen's aid for its extinguishment, if they saw the members of the volunteer fire department stop in their headlong rush towards the conflagration and indulge in a slanging match as to who was responsible for the rotten hose or the lack of water at the fire a week ago?

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